

Sermon Understand the present time
Romans 13:8-14
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Some people seem to float through life in an easy way. They never worry much, they never think much, they eat, drink, marry, have children, they party, they enjoy, they retire.

It is possible to enjoy life by being superficial and to forget about what comes to all of us in the end, many years hopefully AFTER retirement. But maybe earlier.

We can block from our mind all things that are unpleasant in our day and age, and it is surprising to what extent we can live with that half-lie. Forget about poor people who die from hunger, don't think about the future, just cash your salary.

No, we do not use drugs and we are no alcoholics - but we use the latest nice movies on TV, or good computer games to forget reality and to live in a sort of dream world. Or we go out a lot and make sure our time is fully filled with things that divert us from looking in the mirror and looking at life.

But we only live life to the full if we see the truth, the reality of the sharp contrasts in life. We only really live if we face the good and the bad things with open eyes, an open mind and an open heart.

If we avoid the suffering in this world by being intellectually and emotionally superficial, we also miss the real joys in life.

We all get older and older, and one day we will all face the show when we will have to look the last enemy in the face. When we are young, we try to not think about this; when we grow older, it becomes a common theme. Our days are short and few.

1 The night is almost over, the day is almost here

Paul speaks about this in Romans 13 - he says in verse 11, 'you know the time', or 'you understand the present time'.

Christians are called to regularly do a reality check. What is happening in the world? What is happening in our days? Where am I on the time-line? When will my time be over?

Understanding the times we live in - is about having an objective view of our present reality, the culture, the world we live in at this time and in our place.

And it is also about how as Christians to react to the times we live in. What does it mean that we live in 2014 in Cairo? What is the situation here, and what are we to do?

Do you have those early mornings when you wake up when the very first light appears? It is still dark but in the distance, on the horizon, the first light is already visible. And instead of waiting till your alarm-clock rings, instead of waiting for the moment when it is really light, you already get up to prepare for the day. You make a pot of coffee, you gather materials for your work, you anticipate the light by already doing in the darkness what you do as part of your day.

St Paul uses images from this experience that we all sometimes have of waking up very early. "The night is far gone, the day is at hand", he says.

On the horizon we already see the light of the Kingdom of God. We still live in a dark world, where sin and the rejection of what is good so often seem to have the upper hand. We understand the times - that we live in that period of the night that is still dark - but we already see the light.

In this context it is good to listen to the words that Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist spoke about Jesus Christ, even before his birth. In Luke 1:78-79 he describes the coming of Jesus as:

"...the sunrise shall visit us from on high
to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death
to guide our feet into the way of peace."

The world was in darkness, and Jesus came to this world as the sunrise. His incarnation was light in the midst of darkness.

Just as today our Lord can come to us in our soul, to bring light into our personal darkness.

Because until today, our world is in darkness. And even we who have received the sunrise from on high in our darkness, have not been able to fully do away with this darkness. Paul parades an army of sins that were not unknown to the Christians in Rome.

The soldiers in this army of darkness are adultery, murder, theft, orgies, drunkenness, sexual immorality. Things that we all know to be wrong. He also mentions a few sins that are more popular in our churches, things we find quite acceptable. He mentions jealousy, and dissension, or quarrelling.

We as Christians are also full of darkness, and we look forward to that great moment when God will in the end come to renew all things. The world, and us included.

The light is dawning at the end of our present time - we already see a glimpse of the new time - because we have seen the Sunrise from on high, Jesus Christ, in his life and death and resurrection.

'Understand the time'. The word Paul uses for 'time' is the Greek word KAIROS: which means not time in general, but something like, "pivotal moment," "turning point," or "decisive moment."

We live in important days. And this very moment now, is Gods special time.

2 Wake up from your slumber

If we have seen that light on the horizon of time, Paul says, "the hour has come for you to wake from your sleep."

It is almost morning, the world will be renewed, so get up, do what you are supposed to do, Paul tells his fellow Christians in Rome.

Knowing that the new world of God is surely coming, prepare for it. Do not waste more time asleep in this darkness - the light is coming.

I am sure Paul is not suggesting that the Christians in Rome were spiritually asleep or something like that. But he uses the imagery of the night, the new morning and the need to wake up, to underline the urgency of being spiritually vigilant.

How can we wake up and be spiritually awake in view of the future that belongs to God? In my younger years I read much on matters related to the end of times. You know the sort of books probably, by Hal Lindsay and his mates.

Nowadays we have many popular series of books, even movies, that spell out how things will exactly go in the End of Times, and of course, no surprise, our own days are a clear sign that we live in those days of the End. Think for instance of Tim LaHaye and his Left Behind books.

I came slowly to the conclusion that these books are nothing but fabrications, far away from the truth, and that this interest in eschatology, the so-called knowledge of the end of the world, is not helpful at all. It is not true, and it is not helpful.

Paul tells us to wake up, not for studying these matters, and to know - or to think we know - what will one day happen. He wants us to wake up for living today. For living our Christian life now.

We are to make sure we live for God today because salvation is closer to us today than it was ten years ago

Salvation is seen here in its completeness. This is not just about forgiveness of sins - it is about the moment when our adoption as sons and daughters of God will be completed - when even our bodies will be redeemed.

We saw in Romans 8 that we are awaiting that great moment, when we will be freed from all physical problems - when we together with all creation will be renewed by God who will fill this world with his presence.

With each day of our life we come closer to that fantastic day - so live for God! St John Chrysostom, a church father from the 4th century, wrote in his comment on Romans 13, "The nearer the king is, the more [we] ought to be ready to receive him."

St Jerome, another church father, tells us how we have to receive the king, in his Homilies on Psalm 46: "Let us live our lives in the same way now as we are going to live in the day, that is, in the future world."

That is, I think the crucial thing. This is the lifestyle the apostle Paul holds in front of us. We know how one day we will live in the coming Kingdom of God; we know the lifestyle that is part of the new world - so live today as new people. Try to live today in accordance with the person that you will be.

3 Clothe yourself with the Lord Jesus Christ

How will we be? What sort of people will we be? On the last page of the Bible, which is really the first page about our life in the new world of God, we read these words:

“Blessed are those who wash their robes, that they may have the right to the tree of life and may go through the gates into the city. Outside are the dogs, those who practice magic arts, the sexually immoral, the murderers, the idolaters and everyone who loves and practices falsehood. (Rev 22:14-15)

In the new world of which the light is already visible through Jesus Christ, there is no place for all this.

And therefore, Paul says, TODAY there is no place for these things. We will one day be like Jesus Christ in his perfection, and therefore today 'we clothe ourselves with Jesus Christ', or 'we put on Jesus Christ.'

What does this mean, to 'clothe ourselves with Jesus Christ'? A literary parallel is found in Greek literature of those days, where 'to put on' someone, means to play the role of that person. It is language from the theatre. 'Put on Jesus Christ' means, act as if you are Jesus Christ. Behave as he would behave.

Paul unpacks this a bit by saying that we must not owe anything to other people. If you must do something or pay something to someone, do it immediately. The only thing we owe people always, is that we love them. What is the will of God for us today? That we love people, that are are peacemakers, that we have joy.

He who loves, has fulfilled the law, says Paul. Love people, and you have done it all. It is often said that the Christian faith is a religion of the Book - but I am not so sure of that. It is first and foremost a religion of following Jesus Christ - by loving God and by loving your neighbour.

St John of Avila, a mediaeval spanish church leader said in one of his sermons:

"Those of you who are unlettered should not think that this means you cannot enter paradise, study these two commandments, [to love God and your neighbour] and when you have fulfilled them, realise that you have done everything laid down in the Law and the Prophets, and everything taught by the Gospel and by the Apostles and whatever you are admonished to do by all the countless books that have been." (Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost).

How to live today, knowing that the kingdom of God is coming? Someone once said, 'Love God, love your neighbour, and do what you like...'

If love for God and our neighbours wells up in our hearts, if our life is dominated by love, we need no other laws. That is the meaning of, 'clothe yourself with Jesus Christ.'

Conclusion

Wake up, sleep no longer. Soon we will face the Lord our God. Soon our lives will fully renewed. No more sin, nor disease, no more tears.

So let us today live in accordance with the laws of the coming Kingdom - that Kingdom of which we already see bright glimpses when we look at Jesus Christ.

Those laws are not complicated. Love God, love your neighbour, that is what He wants.

Love God, love your neighbour, and do what you like.